



4191-02U

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

[Docket No. SSA-2015-0055]

Social Security Ruling 16-3p

Titles II And XVI: Evaluation Of Symptoms In Disability Claims

AGENCY: Social Security Administration.

ACTION: Notice of Social Security Ruling (SSR).

SUMMARY: We are republishing SSR 16-3p, a ruling that rescinded and superseded SSR 96-7p, with a revision detailing how we apply the SSR as it relates to the applicable date. We changed our terminology from “effective date” to “applicable date” based on guidance from the Office of the Federal Register. We also updated citations to reflect the revised regulations that became effective on March 27, 2017. This Ruling is otherwise unchanged, and provides guidance about how we evaluate statements regarding the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms in disability claims under Titles II and XVI of the Social Security Act (Act) and blindness claims under Title XVI of the Act.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Elaine Tocco, Office of Disability Policy, Social Security Administration, 6401 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21235-6401, (410) 966-6356. For information on eligibility or filing for benefits, call our national toll-free number, 1-800-772-1213 or TTY 1-800-325-0778, or visit our internet site, Social Security Online, at <http://www.socialsecurity.gov>.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Although 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(1) and (a)(2) do not require us to publish this SSR, we are doing so in accordance with 20 CFR 402.35(b)(1).

Through SSRs, we convey to the public SSA precedential decisions relating to the Federal old age, survivors, disability, supplemental security income, and special veterans benefits programs. We may base SSRs on determinations or decisions made at all levels of administrative adjudication, Federal court decisions, Commissioner's decisions, opinions of the Office of the General Counsel, or other interpretations of the law and regulations.

Although SSRs do not have the same force and effect as statutes or regulations, they are binding on all components of the Social Security Administration. 20 CFR 402.35(b)(1).

This SSR will remain in effect until we publish a notice in the Federal Register that rescinds it, or we publish a new SSR that replaces or modifies it.

This SSR, republished in its entirety, includes a revision to clarify that our adjudicators will apply SSR 16-3p when we make determinations and decisions on or after March 28, 2016. When a Federal court reviews our final decision in a claim, we also explain that we expect the court to review the final decision using the rules that were in effect at the time we issued the decision under review. If a court remands a claim for further proceedings after the applicable date of the ruling (March 28, 2016), we will apply SSR 16-3p to the entire period in the decision we make after the court's remand.

(Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance, Programs Nos. 96.001, Social Security--Disability Insurance; 96.002, Social Security-- Retirement Insurance; 96.004, Social Security--Survivors Insurance; 96.006--Supplemental Security Income.)

Nancy A. Berryhill,
Acting Commissioner of Social Security

POLICY INTERPRETATION RULING

TITLES II AND XVI: EVALUATION OF SYMPTOMS IN DISABILITY CLAIMS

This SSR supersedes SSR 96-7p: Policy Interpretation Ruling Titles II and XVI: Evaluation of Symptoms in Disability Claims: Assessing the Credibility of an Individual's Statements.

PURPOSE:

We are rescinding SSR 96-7p: Policy Interpretation Ruling Titles II and XVI Evaluation of Symptoms in Disability Claims: Assessing the Credibility of an Individual's Statements and replacing it with this Ruling. We solicited a study and recommendations from the Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS) on the topic of symptom evaluation. Based on ACUS's recommendations¹ and our adjudicative experience, we are eliminating the use of the term "credibility" from our sub-regulatory policy, as our regulations do not use this term. In doing so, we clarify that subjective symptom evaluation is not an examination of an individual's character.

¹ ACUS made several recommendations in its March 12, 2015 final report, "Evaluating Subjective Symptoms in Disability Claims." Among other things, ACUS recommended we consider amending SSR 96-7p to clarify that subjective symptom evaluation is not an examination of an individual's character, but rather is an evidence-based analysis of the administrative record to determine whether the nature, intensity, frequency, or severity of an individual's symptoms impact his or her ability to work. In any revised SSR, ACUS also recommended we more closely follow our regulatory language about symptom evaluation, which does not use the term "credibility" and instead directs adjudicators to consider medical and other evidence to evaluate the intensity and persistence of symptoms to determine how the individual's symptoms limit capacity for work if he or she is an adult, or for a child with a title XVI disability claim, how symptoms limit ability to function. ACUS further recommended when revising SSR 96-7p, we offer additional guidance to adjudicators on regulatory implementation problems that have been identified since we published SSR 96-7p.

Instead, we will more closely follow our regulatory language regarding symptom evaluation.

Consistent with our regulations, we instruct our adjudicators to consider all of the evidence in an individual's record when they evaluate the intensity and persistence of symptoms after they find that the individual has a medically determinable impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce those symptoms. We evaluate the intensity and persistence of an individual's symptoms so we can determine how symptoms limit ability to perform work-related activities for an adult and how symptoms limit ability to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim.

CITATIONS (AUTHORITY):

Sections 216(i), 223(d), and 1614(a)(3) of the Social Security Act as amended; Regulations no. 4, sections 404.1502, 404.1512(d), 404.1513, 404.1520, 404.1520c, 404.1521, 404.1526, 404.1527, 404.1529, 404.1545 and 404.1594; and Regulations No. 16 sections 416.902, 416.912(d), 416.913, 416.920, 416.920c, 416.921, 416.924(c), 416.924a(b)(9)(ii-iii), 416.926a, 416.927, 416.929, 416.930(c), 416.945, 416.994, and 416.994a.

BACKGROUND:

In determining whether an individual is disabled, we consider all of the individual's symptoms, including pain, and the extent to which the symptoms can reasonably be accepted as consistent with the objective medical and other evidence in the

individual's record. We define a symptom as the individual's own description or statement of his or her physical or mental impairment(s).² Under our regulations, an individual's statements of symptoms alone are not enough to establish the existence of a physical or mental impairment or disability. However, if an individual alleges impairment-related symptoms, we must evaluate those symptoms using a two-step process set forth in our regulations.³

First, we must consider whether there is an underlying medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce an individual's symptoms, such as pain. Second, once an underlying physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce an individual's symptoms is established, we evaluate the intensity and persistence of those symptoms to determine the extent to which the symptoms limit an individual's ability to perform work-related activities for an adult or to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim.

This ruling clarifies how we consider:

- The intensity, persistence, and functionally limiting effects of symptoms,
- Objective medical evidence when evaluating symptoms,
- Other evidence when evaluating symptoms,
- The factors set forth in 20 CFR 404.1529(c)(3) and 416.929(c)(3),

² See 20 CFR 404.1502(i) and 416.902(n) for how our regulations define symptoms.

³ See 20 CFR 404.1529 and 416.929 for how we evaluate statements of symptoms.

- The extent to which an individual's symptoms affect his or her ability to perform work-related activities or function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim, and
- Adjudication standards for evaluating symptoms in the sequential evaluation process.

POLICY INTERPRETATION:

We use a two-step process for evaluating an individual's symptoms.

The two-step process:

Step 1: We determine whether the individual has a medically determinable impairment (MDI) that could reasonably be expected to produce the individual's alleged symptoms

An individual's symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, shortness of breath, weakness, nervousness, or periods of poor concentration will not be found to affect the ability to perform work-related activities for an adult or to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim unless medical signs or laboratory findings show a medically determinable impairment is present. Signs are anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormalities established by medically acceptable clinical diagnostic techniques that can be observed apart from an individual's symptoms.⁴ Laboratory findings are anatomical, physiological, or psychological phenomena, which can be shown by the use of medically acceptable laboratory diagnostic techniques.⁵ We call the medical evidence that provides signs or laboratory findings objective medical evidence. We must have objective medical

⁴ See 20 CFR 404.1502(g) and 416.902(l) for how our regulations define signs.

⁵ See 20 CFR 404.1502(c) and 416.902(g) for how our regulations define laboratory findings.

evidence from an acceptable medical source⁶ to establish the existence of a medically determinable impairment that could reasonably be expected to produce an individual's alleged symptoms.⁷

In determining whether there is an underlying medically determinable impairment that could reasonably be expected to produce an individual's symptoms, we do not consider whether the severity of an individual's alleged symptoms is supported by the objective medical evidence. For example, if an individual has a medically determinable impairment established by a knee x-ray showing mild degenerative changes and he or she alleges extreme pain that limits his or her ability to stand and walk, we will find that individual has a medically determinable impairment that could reasonably be expected to produce the symptom of pain. We will proceed to step two of the two-step process, even though the level of pain an individual alleges may seem out of proportion with the objective medical evidence.

In some instances, the objective medical evidence clearly establishes that an individual's symptoms are due to a medically determinable impairment. At other times, we may have insufficient evidence to determine whether an individual has a medically determinable impairment that could potentially account for his or her alleged symptoms. In those instances, we develop evidence regarding a potential medically determinable impairment using a variety of means set forth in our regulations. For example, we may obtain additional information from the individual about the nature of his or her symptoms and their effect on functioning. We may request additional information from the

⁶ See 20 CFR 404.1502(a) and 416.902(a) for a list of acceptable medical sources.

⁷ See 20 CFR 404.1521 and 416.921 for what is needed to show a medically determinable impairment.

individual about other testing or treatment he or she may have undergone for the symptoms. We may request clarifying information from an individual's medical sources, or we may send an individual to a consultative examination that may include diagnostic testing. We may use our agency experts to help us determine whether an individual's medically determinable impairment could reasonably be expected to produce his or her symptoms. At the administrative law judge hearing level or the Appeals Council level of the administrative review process, we may ask for and consider evidence from a medical or psychological expert to help us determine whether an individual's medically determinable impairment could reasonably be expected to produce his or her symptoms. If an individual alleges symptoms, but the medical signs and laboratory findings do not substantiate any medically determinable impairment capable of producing the individual's alleged symptoms, we will not evaluate the individual's symptoms at step two of our two-step evaluation process.

We will not find an individual disabled based on alleged symptoms alone. If there is no medically determinable impairment, or if there is a medically determinable impairment, but the impairment(s) could not reasonably be expected to produce the individual's symptoms, we will not find those symptoms affect the ability to perform work-related activities for an adult or ability to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim.

Step 2: We evaluate the intensity and persistence of an individual's symptoms such as pain and determine the extent to which an individual's symptoms limit his or her ability to perform work-related activities for an adult or to function independently,

appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim.

Once the existence of a medically determinable impairment that could reasonably be expected to produce pain or other symptoms is established, we recognize that some individuals may experience symptoms differently and may be limited by symptoms to a greater or lesser extent than other individuals with the same medical impairments, the same objective medical evidence, and the same non-medical evidence. In considering the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of an individual's symptoms, we examine the entire case record, including the objective medical evidence; an individual's statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms; statements and other information provided by medical sources and other persons; and any other relevant evidence in the individual's case record.

We will not evaluate an individual's symptoms without making every reasonable effort to obtain a complete medical history⁸ unless the evidence supports a finding that the individual is disabled. We will not evaluate an individual's symptoms based solely on objective medical evidence unless that objective medical evidence supports a finding that the individual is disabled. We will evaluate an individual's symptoms based on the evidence in an individual's record as described below; however, not all of the types of evidence described below will be available or relevant in every case.

1. Consideration of Objective Medical Evidence

⁸ By "complete medical history," we mean the individual's complete medical history for at least the 12 months preceding the month in which he or she filed an application, unless there is a reason to believe that development of an earlier period is necessary or the individual says that his or her alleged disability began less than 12 months before he or she filed an application. 20 CFR 404.1512(b)(ii) and 416.912(b)(ii).

Symptoms cannot always be measured objectively through clinical or laboratory diagnostic techniques. However, objective medical evidence is a useful indicator to help make reasonable conclusions about the intensity and persistence of symptoms, including the effects those symptoms may have on the ability to perform work-related activities for an adult or to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI claim.⁹ We must consider whether an individual's statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of his or her symptoms are consistent with the medical signs and laboratory findings of record.

The intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of many symptoms can be clinically observed and recorded in the medical evidence. Examples such as reduced joint motion, muscle spasm, sensory deficit, and motor disruption illustrate findings that may result from, or be associated with, the symptom of pain.¹⁰ These findings may be consistent with an individual's statements about symptoms and their functional effects. However, when the results of tests are not consistent with other evidence in the record, they may be less supportive of an individual's statements about pain or other symptoms than test results and statements that are consistent with other evidence in the record.

For example, an individual with reduced muscle strength testing who indicates that for the last year pain has limited his or her standing and walking to no more than a few minutes a day would be expected to have some signs of muscle wasting as a result. If no muscle wasting were present, we might not, depending on the other evidence in the

⁹ See 20 CFR 404.1529(c)(2) and 416.929(c)(2).

¹⁰ See 20 CFR 404.1529(c)(2) and 416.929(c)(2).

record, find the individual's reduced muscle strength on clinical testing to be consistent with the individual's alleged impairment-related symptoms.

However, we will not disregard an individual's statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms solely because the objective medical evidence does not substantiate the degree of impairment-related symptoms alleged by the individual.¹¹ A report of minimal or negative findings or inconsistencies in the objective medical evidence is one of the many factors we must consider in evaluating the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of an individual's symptoms.

2. Consideration of Other Evidence

If we cannot make a disability determination or decision that is fully favorable based solely on objective medical evidence, then we carefully consider other evidence in the record in reaching a conclusion about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of an individual's symptoms. Other evidence that we will consider includes statements from the individual, medical sources, and any other sources that might have information about the individual's symptoms, including agency personnel, as well as the factors set forth in our regulations.¹² For example, for a child with a title XVI disability claim, we will consider evidence submitted from educational agencies and personnel, statements from parents and other relatives, and evidence submitted by social welfare agencies, therapists, and other practitioners.¹³

a. The Individual

¹¹ See 20 CFR 404.1529 and 416.929.

¹² See 20 CFR 404.1513 and 416.913.

¹³ See 20 CFR 404.1529(c)(3) and 416.929(c)(3)

An individual may make statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of his or her symptoms. If a child with a title XVI disability claim is unable to describe his or her symptoms adequately, we will accept a description of his or her symptoms from the person most familiar with the child, such as a parent, another relative, or a guardian.¹⁴ For an adult whose impairment prevents him or her from describing symptoms adequately, we may also consider a description of his or her symptoms from a person who is familiar with the individual.

An individual may make statements about symptoms directly to medical sources, other sources, or he or she may make them directly to us. An individual may have made statements about symptoms in connection with claims for other types of disability benefits such as workers' compensation, benefits under programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, or private insurance benefits.

An individual's statements may address the frequency and duration of the symptoms, the location of the symptoms, and the impact of the symptoms on the ability to perform daily living activities. An individual's statements may also include activities that precipitate or aggravate the symptoms, medications and treatments used, and other methods used to alleviate the symptoms. We will consider an individual's statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms, and we will evaluate whether the statements are consistent with objective medical evidence and the other evidence.

¹⁴ See 20 CFR 416.924a(a)(2).

b. Medical Sources

Medical sources may offer diagnoses, prognoses, and opinions as well as statements and medical reports about an individual's history, treatment, responses to treatment, prior work record, efforts to work, daily activities, and other information concerning the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of an individual's symptoms.

Important information about symptoms recorded by medical sources and reported in the medical evidence may include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Onset, description of the character and location of the symptoms, precipitating and aggravating factors, frequency and duration, change over a period of time (e.g., whether worsening, improving, or static), and daily activities. Very often, the individual has provided this information to the medical source, and the information may be compared with the individual's other statements in the case record. In addition, the evidence provided by a medical source may contain medical opinions about the individual's symptoms and their effects. Our adjudicators will consider such opinions by applying the factors in 20 CFR 404.1520c and 416.920c.¹⁵
- A longitudinal record of any treatment and its success or failure, including any side effects of medication.
- Indications of other impairments, such as potential mental impairments, that could account for an individual's allegations.

¹⁵ For claims filed before March 27, 2017, our adjudicators will apply the rules in 20 CFR 404.1527 and 416.927.

Medical evidence from medical sources that have not treated or examined the individual is also important in the adjudicator's evaluation of an individual's statements about pain or other symptoms. For example, State agency medical and psychological consultants and other program physicians and psychologists may offer findings about the existence and severity of an individual's symptoms. We will consider these findings in evaluating the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of the individual's symptoms. Adjudicators at the hearing level or at the Appeals Council level must consider the findings from these medical sources even though they are not bound by them.¹⁶

c. Non-Medical Sources

Other sources may provide information from which we may draw inferences and conclusions about an individual's statements that would be helpful to us in assessing the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms. Examples of such sources include public and private agencies, other practitioners, educational personnel, non-medical sources such as family and friends, and agency personnel. We will consider any statements in the record noted by agency personnel who previously interviewed the individual, whether in person or by telephone. The adjudicator will consider any personal observations of the individual in terms of how consistent those observations are with the individual's statements about his or her symptoms as well as with all of the evidence in the file.

d. Factors to Consider in Evaluating the Intensity, Persistence,
and Limiting Effects of an Individual's Symptoms

¹⁶ See 20 C.F.R. 404.1520c and 416.902c for claims filed on or after March 27, 2017. See 20 CFR 404.1527 and 416.927 for claims filed before March 27, 2017.

In addition to using all of the evidence to evaluate the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of an individual's symptoms, we will also use the factors set forth in [20 CFR 404.1529\(c\)\(3\)](#) and [416.929\(c\)\(3\)](#). These factors include:

1. Daily activities;
2. The location, duration, frequency, and intensity of pain or other symptoms;
3. Factors that precipitate and aggravate the symptoms;
4. The type, dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of any medication an individual takes or has taken to alleviate pain or other symptoms;
5. Treatment, other than medication, an individual receives or has received for relief of pain or other symptoms;
6. Any measures other than treatment an individual uses or has used to relieve pain or other symptoms (e.g., lying flat on his or her back, standing for 15 to 20 minutes every hour, or sleeping on a board); and
7. Any other factors concerning an individual's functional limitations and restrictions due to pain or other symptoms.

We will consider other evidence to evaluate only the factors that are relevant to assessing the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of the individual's symptoms. If there is no information in the evidence of record regarding one of the factors, we will not

discuss that specific factor in the determination or decision because it is not relevant to the case. We will discuss the factors pertinent to the evidence of record.

How we will determine if an individual's symptoms affect the ability to perform work-related activities for an adult, or age-appropriate activities for a child with a title XVI disability claim

If an individual's statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms are consistent with the objective medical evidence and the other evidence of record, we will determine that the individual's symptoms are more likely to reduce his or her capacities to perform work-related activities for an adult or reduce a child's ability to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim.¹⁷ In contrast, if an individual's statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms are inconsistent with the objective medical evidence and the other evidence, we will determine that the individual's symptoms are less likely to reduce his or her capacities to perform work-related activities or abilities to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner.

We may or may not find an individual's symptoms and related limitations consistent with the evidence in his or her record. We will explain which of an individual's symptoms we found consistent or inconsistent with the evidence in his or her record and how our evaluation of the individual's symptoms led to our conclusions. We will evaluate an individual's symptoms considering all the evidence in his or her record.

¹⁷ See 20 CFR 404.1529(c)(4) and 416.929(c)(4).

In determining whether an individual's symptoms will reduce his or her corresponding capacities to perform work-related activities or abilities to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner, we will consider the consistency of the individual's own statements. To do so, we will compare statements an individual makes in connection with the individual's claim for disability benefits with any existing statements the individual made under other circumstances.

We will consider statements an individual made to us at each prior step of the administrative review process, as well as statements the individual made in any subsequent or prior disability claims under titles II and XVI. If an individual's various statements about the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of symptoms are consistent with one another and consistent with the objective medical evidence and other evidence in the record, we will determine that an individual's symptoms are more likely to reduce his or her capacities for work-related activities or reduce the abilities to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner. However, inconsistencies in an individual's statements made at varying times does not necessarily mean they are inaccurate. Symptoms may vary in their intensity, persistence, and functional effects, or may worsen or improve with time. This may explain why an individual's statements vary when describing the intensity, persistence, or functional effects of symptoms.

We will consider an individual's attempts to seek medical treatment for symptoms and to follow treatment once it is prescribed when evaluating whether symptom intensity and persistence affect the ability to perform work-related activities for an adult or the

ability to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner for a child with a title XVI disability claim. Persistent attempts to obtain relief of symptoms, such as increasing dosages and changing medications, trying a variety of treatments, referrals to specialists, or changing treatment sources may be an indication that an individual's symptoms are a source of distress and may show that they are intense and persistent.¹⁸

In contrast, if the frequency or extent of the treatment sought by an individual is not comparable with the degree of the individual's subjective complaints, or if the individual fails to follow prescribed treatment that might improve symptoms, we may find the alleged intensity and persistence of an individual's symptoms are inconsistent with the overall evidence of record. We will not find an individual's symptoms inconsistent with the evidence in the record on this basis without considering possible reasons he or she may not comply with treatment or seek treatment consistent with the degree of his or her complaints. We may need to contact the individual regarding the lack of treatment or, at an administrative proceeding, ask why he or she has not complied with or sought treatment in a manner consistent with his or her complaints. When we consider the individual's treatment history, we may consider (but are not limited to) one or more of the following:

- An individual may have structured his or her activities to minimize symptoms to a tolerable level by avoiding physical activities or mental stressors that aggravate his or her symptoms.

¹⁸ See 20 CFR 404.1529(c) and 416.929(c).

- An individual may receive periodic treatment or evaluation for refills of medications because his or her symptoms have reached a plateau.
- An individual may not agree to take prescription medications because the side effects are less tolerable than the symptoms.
- An individual may not be able to afford treatment and may not have access to free or low-cost medical services.
- A medical source may have advised the individual that there is no further effective treatment to prescribe or recommend that would benefit the individual.
- An individual's symptoms may not be severe enough to prompt him or her to seek treatment, or the symptoms may be relieved with over the counter medications.
- An individual's religious beliefs may prohibit prescribed treatment.
- Due to various limitations (such as language or mental limitations), an individual may not understand the appropriate treatment for or the need for consistent treatment of his or her impairment.
- Due to a mental impairment (for example, individuals with mental impairments that affect judgment, reality testing, or orientation), an individual may not be aware that he or she has a disorder that requires treatment.

- A child may disregard the level and frequency of treatment needed to maintain or improve functioning because it interferes with his or her participation in activities typical of other children his or her age without impairments.

The above examples illustrate possible reasons an individual may not have pursued treatment. However, we will consider and address reasons for not pursuing treatment that are pertinent to an individual's case. We will review the case record to determine whether there are explanations for inconsistencies in the individual's statements about symptoms and their effects, and whether the evidence of record supports any of the individual's statements at the time he or she made them. We will explain how we considered the individual's reasons in our evaluation of the individual's symptoms.

Adjudication - How we will use our evaluation of symptoms in our five-step sequential evaluation process to determine whether an individual is disabled

In evaluating an individual's symptoms, it is not sufficient for our adjudicators to make a single, conclusory statement that "the individual's statements about his or her symptoms have been considered" or that "the statements about the individual's symptoms are (or are not) supported or consistent." It is also not enough for our adjudicators simply to recite the factors described in the regulations for evaluating symptoms. The determination or decision must contain specific reasons for the weight given to the individual's symptoms, be consistent with and supported by the evidence, and be clearly articulated so the individual and any subsequent reviewer can assess how the adjudicator evaluated the individual's symptoms.

Our adjudicators must base their findings solely on the evidence in the case record, including any testimony from the individual or other witnesses at a hearing before an administrative law judge or hearing officer. The subjective statements of the individual and witnesses obtained at a hearing should directly relate to symptoms the individual alleged. Our adjudicators are prohibited from soliciting additional non-medical evidence outside of the record on their own, except as set forth in our regulations and policies.

Adjudicators must limit their evaluation to the individual's statements about his or her symptoms and the evidence in the record that is relevant to the individual's impairments. In evaluating an individual's symptoms, our adjudicators will not assess an individual's overall character or truthfulness in the manner typically used during an adversarial court litigation. The focus of the evaluation of an individual's symptoms should not be to determine whether he or she is a truthful person. Rather, our adjudicators will focus on whether the evidence establishes a medically determinable impairment that could reasonably be expected to produce the individual's symptoms and given the adjudicator's evaluation of the individual's symptoms, whether the intensity and persistence of the symptoms limit the individual's ability to perform work-related activities or, for a child with a title XVI disability claim, limit the child's ability to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner.

In determining whether an individual is disabled or continues to be disabled, our adjudicators follow a sequential evaluation process.¹⁹ The first step of our five-step sequential evaluation process considers whether an individual is performing substantial

¹⁹ See 20 CFR 404.1520 and 416.920. For continuing disability, see 404.1594, 416.994 and 416.994a.

gainful activity. If the individual is performing substantial gainful activity, we find him or her not disabled. If the individual is not performing substantial gainful activity, we proceed to step 2. We do not consider symptoms at the first step of the sequential evaluation process.

At step 2 of the sequential evaluation process, we determine whether an individual has a severe medically determinable physical or mental impairment or combination of impairments that has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of at least 12 months or end in death.²⁰ A severe impairment is one that affects an individual's ability to perform basic work-related activities for an adult or that causes more than minimal functional limitations for a child with a title XVI disability claim.²¹ At this step, we will consider an individual's symptoms and functional limitations to determine whether his or her impairment(s) is severe unless the objective medical evidence alone establishes a severe medically determinable impairment or combination of impairments that meets our duration requirement.²² If an individual does not have a severe medically determinable impairment that meets our duration requirement, we will find the individual not disabled at step 2. If the individual has a severe medically determinable impairment that has met or is expected to meet our duration requirement, we proceed to the next step.

At step 3 of the sequential evaluation process, we determine whether an individual's impairment(s) meets or medically equals the severity requirements of a listed impairment. To decide whether the impairment meets the level of severity described in a

²⁰ See 20 CFR 404.1520(a)(4)(ii) and 416.920(a)(4)(ii).

²¹ See 20 CFR 416.924(c).

²² See 20 CFR 416.920(c) for adults and 416.924(c) for children.

listed impairment, we will consider an individual's symptoms when a symptom(s) is one of the criteria in a listing to ensure the symptom is present in combination with the other criteria. If the symptom is not one of the criteria in a listing, we will not evaluate an individual's symptoms at this step as long as all other findings required by the specific listing are present. Unless the listing states otherwise, it is not necessary to provide information about the intensity, persistence, or limiting effects of a symptom as long as all other findings required by the specific listing are present.²³ In considering whether an individual's symptoms, signs, and laboratory findings are medically equal to the symptoms, signs, and laboratory findings of a listed impairment, we will look to see whether the symptoms, signs, and laboratory findings are at least equal in severity to the listed criteria. However, we will not substitute the individual's allegations of pain or other symptoms for a missing or deficient sign or laboratory finding to raise the severity of the impairment(s) to that of a listed impairment.²⁴ If an individual's impairment meets or medically equals the severity requirements of a listing, we find him or her disabled. If an individual's impairment does not meet or medically equal a listing, we proceed to assess the individual's residual functional capacity at step 4 of the sequential evaluation process unless the individual is a child with a title XVI disability claim.

For a child with a title XVI disability claim whose impairment does not meet or medically equal the severity requirements of a listing, we consider whether his or her impairment functionally equals the listings. This means that the impairment results in "marked" limitations in two out of six domains of functioning or an "extreme" limitation

²³ See 20 CFR 404.1529(d)(2) and 416.929(d)(2).

²⁴ See 20 CFR 404.1529(d)(3) and 416.929(d)(3).

in one of the six domains.²⁵ We will evaluate an individual's symptoms at this step when we rate how a child's impairment-related symptoms affect his or her ability to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner in each functional domain. If a child's impairment functionally equals a listing, we find him or her disabled. If a child's impairment does not functionally equal the listings, we find him or her not disabled. For a child with a title XVI disability claim, the sequential evaluation process ends at this step.

If the individual's impairment does not meet or equal a listing, we will assess and make a finding about an individual's residual functional capacity based on all the relevant medical and other evidence in the individual's case record. An individual's residual functional capacity is the most the individual can still do despite his or her impairment-related limitations. We consider the individual's symptoms when determining his or her residual functional capacity and the extent to which the individual's impairment-related symptoms are consistent with the evidence in the record.²⁶

After establishing the residual functional capacity, we determine whether an individual is able to do any past relevant work. At step 4, we compare the individual's residual functional capacity with the requirements of his or her past relevant work. If the individual's residual functional capacity is consistent with the demands of any of his or her past relevant work, either as the individual performed it or as the occupation is generally performed in the national economy, then we will find the individual not

²⁵ See 20 CFR 416.926a.

²⁶ See 20 CFR 404.1545 and 416.945.

disabled. If none of the individual's past relevant work is within his or her residual functional capacity, we proceed to step 5 of the sequential evaluation process.

At step 5 of the sequential evaluation process, we determine whether the individual is able to adjust to other work that exists in significant numbers in the national economy. We consider the same residual functional capacity, together with the individual's age, education, and past work experience. If the individual is able to adjust to other work that exists in significant numbers in the national economy, we will find him or her not disabled. If the individual cannot adjust to other work that exists in significant numbers in the national economy, we find him or her disabled. At step 5 of the sequential evaluation process, we will not consider an individual's symptoms any further because we considered the individual's symptoms when we determined the individual's residual functional capacity.

This SSR is applicable on MARCH 28, 2016.²⁷

CROSS-REFERENCES: SSR 96-8p, "Titles II and XVI: Assessing Residual Functional Capacity in Initial Claims," and Program Operations Manual System, section DI 24515.064.

²⁷ Our adjudicators will apply this ruling when we make determinations and decisions on or after March 28, 2016. When a Federal court reviews our final decision in a claim, we expect the court will review the final decision using the rules that were in effect at the time we issued the decision under review. If a court finds reversible error and remands a case for further administrative proceedings after March 28, 2016, the applicable date of this ruling, we will apply this ruling to the entire period at issue in the decision we make after the court's remand. Our regulations on evaluating symptoms are unchanged.

